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Theater

'Actual Sho's' California Realities

By David Richards
Washington Post Staff Writer

For those who appreciated the Kennedy Center when Peter Sellars was still around to shake things up, "Actual Sho" will be a happy reminder of the old days, or who knows, a harbinger of new.

This 80-minute, intermissionless piece by performance artist George Coates, which opened a four-day run in the Opera House last night, is the inaugural presentation of the center's month-long celebration of the arts of San Francisco. It will help, in this instance, to think of San Francisco not as a fabled city of cable cars and the quaint Victorian houses known as "painted ladies," but as the home of the once-celebrated Haight-Ashbury district and, although it now seems part of the distant past, a citadel of hippies, head trips and psychedelia.

In Japanese, explains a program note, "Sho" is a word of many meanings—"flight" being one, "evaporating afterglow" being another. To a pleasantly pulsating score by

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'Actual Sho'

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Marc Ream that embraces elements from jazz, the church oratorio, the African ritual, American gospel and the space age computer, this curious enterprise fills the Opera House stage with a succession of strange overlapping images.

The cast is composed of 13 performers—one of whom is apparently a minister (Sean Kilcoyne), who seems to have choked on a chicken bone at one of the umpteen church suppers he is obliged to attend and who utters the only spoken words of the evening. Exchanging his pastor's garb for miner's gear, he wends his way through the alien spectacle, making of it no more (or no less?) than the average spectator.

The rest of the cast consists of a dancer (Hitomi Ikuma), who crops up as a variety of Eastern deities; seven singers, who sing sounds, rather than words, in styles ranging from rock to operatic; and four onstage musicians who keep the music coming, rather like rushing water. Rational minds have no business poking around such an endeavor for revelatory meanings. Either you go with the flow, as they like to say in California, or you stay home and read Descartes.

To borrow from the program again, "Actual Sho" bypasses monochromatic fundamentalism in favor of a multiplicity of contending realities," which is to say that it is pretty much what you want it to be. What it offers is an abundance of seductive, surprising and baffling environments—each of which comes into focus, holds the stage for a few minutes and then fades out, giving way to the next.

This is accomplished largely by the use of projections on motorized Levelor blinds, although the performers themselves are often transformed by the sundry shapes and colors thrown

upon them. At the center of the stage is what can best be described as a huge screw. It is in fairly constant motion, tipping from side to side while rotating 360 degrees. At one point, several oversized drumsticks appear on its head, making it look like the green giant's dinner plate.

Later, it becomes the red hot burner of a stove, and later still, a mammoth manhole cover, out of which pop, mole-like, several of the performers. Much of the time, it seems to be functioning as an altar for the rituals of the subconscious.

None of this is disagreeable, if you are willing to regard it as a sensory experience and can accept that a certain disorientation is part of the game. At times, the imagery has a distinct op-art flavor, like those picture book eye-benders that defy you to say which circle is bigger. At other times, you could be in the ocean depths and the large screw could be a sunken space ship.

Suddenly, lush foliage blankets the stage. Or great storm clouds that look to have been lifted from the canvas of an old master. Or ancient rocks that could belong to a canyon or an Asian temple. A futuristic hospital setting recurs periodically, suggesting, possibly, that we have ventured into an enchanted realm after death.

At 80 minutes, "Actual Sho" doesn't wear out its welcome, as so much performance art does. And it has a certain lightness of spirit that makes it more like an amusement park ride (the Dipsy Doodle, say) than a trek through a thicket of great themes. Nonetheless, it's up to the spectator to formulate his own conclusions. Coates, I suspect, welcomes any and all interpretations. He who finds his childhood reveries in "Actual Sho" is no further off the mark than he who perceives it as a vision of life on Mars.

That's an admirably democratic premise. But it does raise a point: Art has always been open to interpretation, but great art invariably points us all more or less in the same direction. "Actual Sho" leaves us looking every which way.

Actual Sho, conceived and directed by George Coates. Music by Marc Ream. Scenic projection designers, Charles Rose and Christopher Evans; screen and slide lighting designer, Jeff Hunt; costumes, Ariel Jones and Sue Fox; choreography, Colleen Larkin; film projection designer, Karen Rice. With Sean Kilcoyne, Kathryn Neal, Molly Holm, Napata Mero, Hitomi Ikuma, Marilyn Smith, Diana Rosalind Trimble, Ed Cohn. At the Kennedy Center Opera House, through Saturday.



Sean Kilcoyne in George Coates' performance piece "Actual Sho."